

THE CONVERSATION

Far-right reaches for new extremes in the Czech Republic

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Jan Culik

Senior Lecturer in Czech Studies at University of Glasgow



A far-right protestor carries a noose through the streets of Prague. Author provided

Right-wing extremists recently held a demonstration on Wenceslas Square in the centre of Prague, Czech Republic to protest against immigration into the country. They waved gallows and nooses and called for them to be used on “all traitors of the nation”. Those traitors, in their eyes, are the defenders of immigrants and the Czech government for pursuing what they see as pro-immigration policies.

Czech police did not act against the demonstrators carrying the gallows and nooses. They did, though, arrest six left-wing dissidents protesting against the demonstration.

This is probably the first time such extreme symbols have been used in a protest in the Czech Republic, which generally has a reputation for relative racial tolerance.

The Czech police issued a **statement** saying the presence of the gallows and nooses was “a new phenomenon” and suggested that the law had not been broken. When criticised by the Czech Social Democratic home secretary Milan Chovanec, the police said that they would ask for expert legal advice “to analyse the problem”.

Czech prime minister Bohuslav Sobotka took a stronger line. He said the arrest of the left-wing demonstrators was "absurd" and warned that the police must not tolerate intimidation of this kind. Sobotka added that he would not be intimidated and would press on with plans to take in several hundred refugees.

Independent Czech lawyers later expressed the view that carrying gallows and nooses at a demonstration is indeed illegal under Czech law and that the police should have acted. Yet still no-one has been charged.

In the meantime, two more large demonstrations are due to be held in Prague on July 18 – one for and one against immigration.

Intolerance in the mainstream

These protests come against a backdrop of creeping Islamophobia in Czech politics. Martin Konvička, a biologist at the University of South Bohemia, has founded a political party called The Anti-Islamic Bloc, and plans to stand candidates in next year's regional elections. Whether they will do well remains unclear, but for the time being, the party is capitalising on fear about immigration to attract support.

Czech president Miloš Zeman has publicly expressed similar views, stating that he too, is against Islam in the Czech Republic.

Zeman won the direct presidential election in 2013, having run as a left-wing candidate who was highly critical of the then right-of-centre government. However, since his election he has made ever more controversial and ever more right wing, often very populist, public statements.

Recent international political developments, such as the war in Ukraine and the perceived danger of a wave of illegal immigrants threatening to swamp Europe, have caused considerable confusion among Czech voters. As a result, the division between right-wing and left-wing attitudes have become increasingly blurred. Many left-wing activists in the Czech Republic now openly sympathise with the right-wing regime of Vladimir Putin in Russia, and many disaffected Czech citizens who would have considered themselves as left wing have now openly assumed a strongly anti-immigration attitude.

According to a government opinion poll published June, 83% Czechs are seriously worried about the possible influx of refugees into the Czech Republic – even though the government has agreed to accept only a few hundred.

This shift in public attitude has been encouraged by popular media and social networks, which have normalised and legitimised racism and xenophobia. Many Czechs are experiencing disillusionment. After decades of being excluded from the stable and affluent West, they have finally been able to join, just as it seems to be destabilising in front of their very eyes.

At the same time, there seems to be very little informed, factual and rational debate to explain contemporary political and economic issues to the public and dispel their fears about immigration. That, in turn, enables scenes like those that took place in Prague to go ahead without sanction.



The police failed to stop the protesters. Author provided

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